



Kay, T. (2020). Dante's Poetics of the Subhuman: A Reading of Inferno XXXII. *L'Alighieri*, 54, 99-115.

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher, A. Longo Editore snc.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

TRISTAN KAY (University of Bristol)

DANTE'S POETICS OF THE SUBHUMAN:

A READING OF *INFERNO* XXXII¹

ABSTRACT

This reading of *Inferno* XXXII pays close attention to its meditation on language and representation. It argues that in this canto, which features an unusual concentration of bestial imagery and instances of human language collapsing into animal sound, Dante formulates a “negative” poetics in order to render the pilgrim’s journey through this bleak realm of subhumanity, a poetics that stands in opposition to the poetics of *trasmunar* we find in the *Paradiso*. Nonetheless, it takes seriously Dante’s claims that the horrors of Cocytus are ultimately beyond the expressive reach of even the most uncompromising poetry and it considers whether – in Dante’s understanding – any human language confers an improper dignity onto this part of Hell. The essay also places an emphasis on Statius’s *Thebaid* and Dante’s own *rime petrose* as important intertextual models for mediating the “subhuman” experience of Cocytus, as well as tracing the theme of contemporary political factionalism that runs through this canto of treachery.

The final three cantos of the *Inferno* describe Cocytus, Hell’s ninth and final circle, which takes the form of a frozen lake divided into four concentric circles. These contain four categories of traitors and, in the final section Judecca, Lucifer himself. Canto XXXII, sometimes neglected in favour of the pilgrim’s dramatic dialogue with Ugolino that dominates canto XXXIII, unfolds in the first two sub-circles of Cocytus, Caina and Antenora, in which traitors against kindred (Caina) and country or political party (Antenora) are punished. Fifteen sinners are introduced over the course of the canto, the great majority taken from contemporary Italy. But as well as

¹ This essay is a more fully developed version of a *lectura* I presented at the University of St Andrews in 2012. I am grateful to Robert Wilson and Claudia Rossignoli, for inviting me to speak at their *Lectura Dantis Andreapolitana*; to Elena Lombardi, for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay; and to Giuseppe Ledda, both for encouraging me to submit this version to «L’Alighieri» and for his spirit of openness and collaboration.

questions of betrayal and political factionalism, the canto also sees Dante offer a rich meditation on the negative limits of humanity and of linguistic signification – a theme to which I shall pay close attention in the present reading.

Cocytus represents a watershed for pilgrim and poet alike. While the pilgrim will confront horrors here that surpass everything previously encountered, the poet will face unprecedented representational challenges. The opening prologue, comprising the first twelve lines of the canto, draws a line between Cocytus and everything that has preceded it and provides a rich meditation upon the formidable task of composing these closing three cantos. This is a place «onde parlare è duro» (14), not only because describing it renews the pain of the experience, but also because its horrors exist beyond the limits of a linguistic system formed to communicate the nature of a very different reality:

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chioce
come si converrebbe al tristo buco
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
io premerei di mio concetto il suco
più pienamente; ma perch' io non l'abbo,
non senza tema a dicer mi conduco;
ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo.
Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,
sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso. (1-12)

Describing this place is not a task to be undertaken lightly («ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo»). “Instinctive” language («lingua che chiami mamma o babbo») must now be replaced by harsh-sounding verses of the utmost skill and artistry («rime aspre e chioce»)². The sense of a watershed is reinforced by the invocation of the Muses («quelle donne [...] ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe»), ordinarily summoned by Dante at the beginning of a *cantica*. They are addressed

² See Bosco and Reggio's commentary in DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Divina Commedia*, ed. and with a commentary by U. BOSCO and G. REGGIO, Florence, Le Monnier, 1979: «ci dice che non basta per quella materia un linguaggio per così dire istintivo, quello che impariamo subito e adoperiamo comunemente nella vita pratica, ma è necessario un linguaggio sorvegliato, duro per concisa elaborazione, quale solo le Muse [...] possono dare» (p. 465).

here as the assistants of Amphion, known to Dante from Horace's *Ars Poetica* (391-400) and Statius's *Thebaid* (I, 10), who had used his voice and lyre with the aid of the Muses to animate the rocks that created a wall around the city of Thebes, a classical locus of civil strife. This allusion both supplements the images of hardness and stoniness that proliferate in this canto and foreshadows the references both to the Theban enemies Tydeus and Melanippus (*Inf.* XXXII, 130-32) and to the depraved city of Pisa as a «novella Tebe» (*Inf.* XXXIII, 89) later in Cocytus. In so doing, it reinforces a broader analogy, for the Theban “city” of Dante's underworld, the «città dolente» (*Inf.* III, 1), lorded over by the impotent “emperor” Satan («Lo ’mperador del doloroso regno»: *Inf.* XXXIV, 28), is an iniquitous counterpoint to the harmonious city of God described in the third *cantica* («quella Roma onde Cristo è romano»: *Purg.* XXXII, 102)³. Cocytus specifically stands in counterpoint to the Empyrean. While the ethereal dwelling place of the blessed is first perceived as a dynamic, circular river of light (*Par.* XXX, 61-63) and a place of «pura luce» (*Par.* XXX, 39), this frozen lake, a place of spiritually inert matter, is the furthest place in the cosmos from God: the source of all light and all meaning⁴.

The sheer materiality of this place is strongly foregrounded. The opening lines feature several images of weight, gravity, and hardness. These will recur throughout the canto and indeed throughout Cocytus: the «tristo buco / sovra ’l qual pontan tutte l’altre rocce». It is little wonder that such imagery abounds here, for this desolate place, devoid of levity and transcendence, is the material core of the Ptolemaic universe («lo mezzo / al quale ogni gravezza si rauna»: 73-74). In fact, Dante's emphasis on the physical hardness of this place relates closely to his meditation on poetry. He describes in the opening lines how he attempts to “squeeze” («premerai») every last drop of meaning from his poetic imagination, adding to the pressurized

³ On the Theban character of Dante's Hell, see K. BROWNE, *Dante and the Classical Poets*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by R. Jacoff, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 141-60 (pp. 149-50).

⁴ See A. M. CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano*, in «L'Alighieri», 25 (1984), pp. 23-46, for whom Cocytus and the Empyrean represent «i due estremi della scala». Their respective «freddura» (*Inf.* XXXII, 53) and «ardore» (*Par.* XXX, 48) reflect the contrast between hate and love that these places encapsulate. See also R. KIRKPATRICK, *Dante's «Inferno»: Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 402.

ambience⁵. Here more than anywhere else in the *Commedia* Dante foregrounds the hardness and materiality of his poetic language. What he seeks are «rime aspre e chioce», whose phonic qualities in some way reflect the unique harshness of Cocytus. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that Dante declares the inadequacy of *any* existing language to convey the true nature of this realm, through what Barolini terms the «quintessentially Dantesque move of the disclaimer»⁶. These cantos can merely provide an approximation of the reality of this place, whose full horror is beyond the reach of even the harshest and most uncompromising verses. The *Paradiso*, of course, is also prefaced by a declaration of linguistic inadequacy. In canto I, Dante famously describes how the experience of *trasumanar*—a neologism conveying the process of becoming more than human—is inherently beyond words:

Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba
che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi.
Trasumanar significar *per verba*
non si poria; però l'esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Par. I, 67-72)

The entire text of the *Paradiso* by necessity condescends to the intellect of a reader who has not yet soared to that realm where the human word, partial and fragmented, is replaced by the divine Word of unqualified meaning⁷. Thus, the Ovidian myth of Glaucus who, upon eating of a magical herb, was transformed into an immortal sea God, must serve as an «esempio» for the reader who might one day experience this divine metamorphosis. In *Inferno* XXXII, the inadequacy of language is of a diametrically opposed sort – it pertains not to the transhuman but to the subhuman. Six centuries later Primo Levi would invoke this infernal topos of “negative”

⁵ See R. M. DURLING and R. L. MARTINEZ, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's «Rime Petrose»*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990: «As in the *petrose*, the poetics of the text derives from the specific cosmological feature described. Like a giant press, the accumulation of physical weight and grief at the center presses down on the poet, extruding the harsh rhymes» (p. 220).

⁶ T. BAROLINI, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 89.

⁷ On the topos of ineffability in the *Commedia*, see G. LEDDA, *La guerra della lingua: ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella «Commedia» di Dante*, Ravenna, Longo, 2002.

ineffability in reflecting upon the inadequacy of “free” human language when describing the horrors of Auschwitz:

Noi diciamo «fame», diciamo «stanchezza», «paura», e «dolore», diciamo «inverno», e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. *Se i lager fossero durati più a lungo un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato*; e di questo si sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero.⁸

The essence of Hell—like that of the *Lager*—is something wholly extraneous to the world experienced by “free men” and therefore irreducible to that world’s language.

Cocytus, and canto XXXII especially, can be seen to culminate the discourse of the confusion and corruption of language that defines the linguistic experience of Dante’s Hell. As Elena Lombardi has shown, Hell is «the realm of *vox unde sonum*, of sound unrelated to meaning, the place of the distortion of language»⁹. Language in Hell no longer serves to point us towards higher truths, as on earth (and again in Purgatory), but rather «slides away from meaning into confusion» – a loss of signification that corresponds to the spiritual and ontological loss that is the essence of this realm. The blurring of the line between human language and animal noise we shall witness in this particular canto points not only to the degradation of language and of the human capacity to create social and affective bonds, but also to the descent towards meaninglessness that is the essence of Dante’s Hell. According to Augustine and Aquinas, evil is to be understood not as a substantial entity that competes with good, but merely as the negation and absence of the good that is rejected (*privatio boni*). Thus, for Peter Hawkins, Hell is «the spiritual version of a black hole»¹⁰. It is no coincidence, in this theological context, that Dante’s Satan, the ultimate nullity towards which the rest of Hell gravitates, is not an eloquent, Byronic seducer, but a voiceless, mechanical nonentity, a silent parody of the true Christian God.

⁸ P. LEVI, *Se questo è un uomo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1958, p. 156. Emphasis mine..

⁹ E. LOMBARDI, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, The Modistae, Dante*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 145.

¹⁰ P. S. HAWKINS, *Bottom of the Universe: Dante and Evil*, in *Dante in Oxford: The Paget Toynbee Lectures*, ed. by T. Kay, M. McLaughlin and M. Zaccarello, Oxford, Legenda, 2011, pp. 147-59 (p. 150).

It is therefore fitting that Dante's language in describing Cocytus is often defined by what William Franke calls its «dead-wood literalness»¹¹. While the *Paradiso* will predominantly feature “sweet”, smooth, and richly metaphorical language that attempts to convey the ascent of the soul towards God, Dante's far more concrete and literal language in these cantos refuses to open itself up to higher meaning. A key word in the prologue is «chiocce» (‘clucking’). This takes Dante's language beyond the harsh lexis espoused more conventionally in his earlier doctrinal canzoni («rima aspra'e sottile»: *Rime* 4, line 14) to plumb rasping, subhuman depths¹². Significantly, «chiocce» is an example of onomatopoeic language; language of the most material kind that signifies as much through its aural texture as through its semiotic referentiality¹³. Moreover, it points to a language that is less than human, evoking not only the non-semantic clucking of the hen but also the infernal idiom of the bestial guardian Plutus in canto VII («maladetto lupo»: *Inf.* VII, 8), uttered «con la voce chioccia» (*Inf.* VII, 2).

Yet while Dante indeed deploys harsher language here than anywhere else in the *Commedia*, we must remember, in view of the linguistic disclaimer that opens the canto («if I possessed such rhymes»), that no intelligible human language is ultimately harsh or clucking enough. Our earthly language may only dignify this spiritually desolate place, divorced from the source of all meaning («il fonte ond'ogne ver deriva»: *Par.* IV, 116). What would truly convey the

¹¹ See W. FRANKE, *The Death and Damnation of Poetry in «Inferno» XXXI-XXXIV: Ugolino and Narrative as an Instrument of Revenge*, in «Romance Studies», 28, no. 1 (Jan 2010), pp. 27-35: «The dead-wood literalness of language comes to stand for its lack of transitivity, of referential transparency – and especially of transcendence in a theological sense. [...] While the *Inferno* tends to concretize the literal meaning of its own language, in the *Paradiso* language is metaphorical in a sense that points away from the concrete towards infinitely open and ineffable meaning. [...] Hell is not about contemplating the Infinite and divine (at least not directly) but fallen sinful humanity. Language's falling into the dark opacity of the literal expresses this. Here the truth is a matter of facing brute facts» (p. 29).

¹² See CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano* cit., p. 25. As Emilio Pasquini notes, the language of Cocytus must go beyond the low and “comic” language of Malebolge and, with the reference to «chiocce», points towards something more extreme and subhuman: «il linguaggio che funzionava per le Malebolge qui resta inadeguato; per aderire al nuovo ed estremo universo del male, occorre qualcosa in più, che Dante sembrava non possedere ancora: una sorta di balbuzie translinguistica o di urlo disumano»: E. PASQUINI, *Lettura di «Inferno» XXXII*, in «L'Alighieri», 13 (1999), pp. 19-37 (p. 30).

¹³ See Durling and Martinez's commentary in DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, ed., trans., and with a commentary by R. M. DURLING and R. L. MARTINEZ, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996: «That the significance of onomatopoeic words is their sound, their acoustic “matter”, suits them to the dense material center of the cosmos» (p. 506).

nature of this spiritual void would be a “language” so «chioccio» that it would become something altogether other and no longer recognizable (cf. Levi’s «nuovo aspro linguaggio»). There is thus an important tension in this canto between the *need* to communicate the reality of Hell («tutta tua vision fa manifesta»: *Par.* XVII, 128) and the impossibility of the task. Dante must push language to its negative limits but, in order to communicate his crucial message, nonetheless preserve its integrity and intelligibility. Such linguistic integrity in describing the depths of Hell paradoxically constitutes mimetic failure («ma perche’ io *non l’abbo*»), just as the text of the *Paradiso* can only temporalize and fragment that which is one, whole, and eternal («significar trasumanar per verba / *non si poria*»). Dante must, in short, express through the intellectual medium of language that which would more fittingly be conveyed through discordant, sub-linguistic noise; he must confer order and meaning onto meaninglessness, *subumanar significar per verba*.

The rich and suggestive prologue also raises the question of the relationship between the *Commedia* and two of Dante’s other works: the linguistic treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* and the lyric sequence the *rime petrose*. Line 2 («come *si converrebbe* al tristo buco») introduces the rhetorical principle of *convenientia*, according to which a stylistic register should correspond to the subject being described¹⁴. This notion had been at the heart of the *De vulgari*, in which Dante had described how high, medium, and low registers should correspond to different protagonists and poetic *materiae* (*Dve* II, i-iv). *Convenientia* here in the *Commedia*, however, is determined not by arbitrarily assigned stylistic principles but by the intention that «dal fatto il dir non sia diverso». The rhetorical objective of the canto—and indeed the poem—is the closest possible correspondence of form and content, language and reality, as Dante draws upon the broadest possible linguistic spectrum to articulate as faithfully as possible the fullness of what he claims to have experienced. His linguistic choices are no longer informed by the norms of rhetoric, which

¹⁴ As noted by Barolini (*Undivine Comedy* cit., p. 296, n. 43), Dante’s use of *convenire* here aligns him with Nimrod in the previous canto, who speaks his infernal tongue as one «cui non si *convenia* più dolci salmi» (XXXI, 69). Dante the poet, too, must (temporarily) forego any “sweet” language in describing this most harsh place.

might compromise the expressive capacity of his poem, but by the reality—the *fatto*—he describes. Indeed, the words *mamma* and *babbo* we find in line 9 («né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo») were excluded from the narrower «volgare illustre» theorized in the earlier treatise. Here they serve as a signpost to the *Commedia*’s pluristylism and to the lexical depth and breadth available—and indeed essential—to this poem¹⁵. An unflinching commitment to veracity now trumps an adherence to the laws of rhetoric as the basis for the poet’s stylistic choices.

While Dante now departs from the more restrictive rhetorical approach associated with the *De vulgari*, another phase of his authorial development is resurrected. The author’s reference to «rime aspre» clearly evokes the *rime petrose*, four poems that had described in language of startling acridity Dante’s debilitating passion for the so-called *donna pietra*, described as a stone on account of her impermeable hardness and frigidity. Specifically, the opening lines of canto XXXII recall the exordium of the lyric *Così nel mio parlar* (*Rime* 1):

Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro
com’è ne li atti questa bella pietra,
la quale ognora impetra
maggior durezza e più natura cruda... (1-4)

As in the prologue to canto XXXII, Dante presents himself in in this canzone at a poetic threshold, at which he must reassess his means of expression. In both cases, he is concerned with creating a radically new poetics to tally with a new and difficult experience and identifies a language that is «aspro» as the most apposite to his needs. Commentators have identified

¹⁵ This flexibility is the essence of the style of “comedy” for Dante, which was seen in the Middle Ages as the register most defined by breadth and inclusiveness. Dante’s poem is “comic” not only in its narrative arc but also in its non-adherence to the *genera dicendi* that necessarily limit the communicative power and veracity of poetic language. See for example Z. G. BARAŃSKI, *Significar “per verba”*: Notes on Dante and Plurilingualism, in «The Italianist», 6 (1986), pp. 5-18; T. KAY, 17. *Seductive Lies, Unpalatable Truths, Alter Egos*, in *Vertical Readings in Dante’s «Comedy»: Volume 2*, ed. by G. Corbett and H. Webb, Cambridge, Open Book, 2017, pp. 127-49. On canto XXXII as quintessentially “comic” in its varied use of style and register, see C. DE CAPRIO, *Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi: «Inferno» xxxii*, in *Cento canti per cento anni: «Inferno» XV/III-XXXIV*, ed. by E. Malato and A. Mazzucchi, Rome, Salerno, 2013, pp. 988-1025 (p. 1022).

numerous echoes of the *petrose* in the poetry of Cocytus, especially in the present canto¹⁶. The poems' abrasive language, harsh in sound and concrete in meaning, proliferates here, while the barren wintry landscape that in the *petrose* reflects the lover's erotic deprivation is metamorphosed into the frozen realm of Cocytus. As we shall soon see, the *Commedia*'s most striking allusion to the *petrose*, and to *Così nel mio parlar* specifically, comes later in this canto, as Dante evokes the violent sexual fantasy that concluded that canzone in describing his rage towards the reviled Florentine traitor Bocca.

*

From line 13, Dante turns his attention to the «mal create plebe» (13) who inhabit Cocytus. These souls, Dante exclaims, would better have been born as sheep or goats («mei foste state qui pecore o zebel»: 15) since they would then have lacked the rational capacity they so wretchedly squandered and abused. For if the human's rational and immortal soul affords him a unique capacity for intellection and redemption, it also instils a potential for evil and damnation. This *terzina* conflates two pertinent passages from Matthew's Gospel: Jesus' words regarding the ultimate traitor, Judas: «It would have been better for that man if he had not been born» (26:24) and the judgement parable of the sheep and goats (25)¹⁷. It also introduces the theme of subhumanity that plays a key role in this canto, whose sinners often take on animal traits¹⁸.

As Dante and Virgil proceed, the pilgrim is warned by an unidentified voice to watch his step, so that he does not kick the heads of the souls that protrude from the ice. We learn more about the sinners below in due course, but Dante first offers a more general description of his

¹⁶ See, for example, L. BLASUCCI, *L'esperienza delle «petrose» e il linguaggio della «Commedia»*, in *Studi su Dante e Ariosto*, Milan and Naples, Ricciardi, 1969, pp. 1-15; DE CAPRIO, *Perché cotanto* cit., p. 1015; DURLING and MARTINEZ, *Time and the Crystal* cit., pp. 217-23; KIRKPATRICK, *Dante's «Inferno»* cit., pp. 409-13.

¹⁷ See *Matt.* 26:24: «Bonum erat ei si natus non fuisset homo ille». Fachard notes the anticipation of Beatrice's «uomini siate, e non pecore matte» (*Par.* V, 80): D. FACHARD, *Canto XXXII*, in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis: «Inferno»*, ed. by G. Güntert and M. Picone, Florence, Cesati, 2000, pp. 445-56 (p. 445).

¹⁸ On the concentration of animal imagery in this canto, see S. BELLOMO, *Tra giganti e traditori: Inf. XXXI-XXXII*, in *Esperimenti danteschi*, ed. by S. Invernizzi, Genoa-Milan, Marietti, 2009, pp. 241-51 (p. 248); and especially DE CAPRIO, *Perché cotanto* cit., passim.

surroundings. The frozen lake under his feet appears more like glass than water («un lago che per gelo / avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembiante»: 23-24), recalling two passages from the *rime petrose*: «l'acqua morta si converte in vetro» (*Rime* 9, line 63); «l'acqua diventa cristallina petra» (*Rime* 8, line 26). Dante conveys its crystalline hardness by comparing it to the frozen rivers Danube in Austria and Don in Russia. Unlike the Italian rivers evoked earlier in the *Inferno*, these are places of near proverbial or legendary resonance in his imagination. Two more “local” geographical similes follow, however, as Dante explains how not even mountains like Tambernici or Pietrapana (both in the Apuan Alps) crashing down onto this ice could break it: «che se Tambernichi / vi fosse sù caduto, o Pietrapana, / non avria pur da l'orlo fatto cricchi» (28-30). Noteworthy in these lines are the “harsh” and difficult rhyme words: «Osterlicchi» / «Tambernichi» / «cricchi». The last of these, describing the creaking of the ice under pressure, is a salient example of the onomatopoeic language that Dante deploys in Cocytus.

Having described the frozen lake, Dante turns his attention to the traitors. The reasons for treachery's status as the gravest form of sin are outlined in Virgil's discourse upon the moral order of Hell in *Inferno* XI. Treachery is a wilful sin that acts in opposition not only to the natural love that unites all humans but also the trust upon which a functioning and prosperous human society depends (*Inf.* XI, 61-63). As first noted by the fourteenth-century commentator Guido da Pisa, the gravity of each particular kind of treachery is determined by how freely the love betrayed was granted to the traitor. Hence, the betrayal of a benefactor, who offers his love most freely, is the most serious form of treachery, while betrayal of a blood relative is the least, since familial bonds of trust are more naturally and less freely established.

We learn more about Dante's notion of treachery from the *contrapasso* found in this ninth circle. Each sinner in Cocytus is fixed in the ice, while the depth to which he is submerged, from neck-high to fully immersed, reflects the gravity of his treachery. Ice is doubtless chosen by Dante as the dominant feature of this final circle since it is antithetical to fire, the element

associated metaphorically with charity. Ice and in particular the notion of a frozen or petrified heart also carry a strong association with sin in medieval Christianity¹⁹. For instance, Ezekiel (11:19 and 36:26), speaks of replacing the stony, stubborn heart of the sinner with a fleshly, receptive one²⁰. It seems significant in this regard that Cocytus is populated exclusively by male sinners. Heather Webb has explored, with reference to medieval physiological discourses, how the heart in medieval Christian culture was «double-gendered»: at once porous and receptive (regarded as feminine attributes) and strong and projective (seen as masculine attributes)²¹. A cardiocentric self that failed to attain an adequate balance between these poles found itself in spiritual and physical peril. In stark contrast with Francesca da Rimini, the seductive female sinner with whom our journey through Hell began, possessor of a heart so open to the snares of beauty and desire that it lacked the filter of moral discretion, the souls of Cocytus embody a kind of sealed and impenetrable masculinity. These stone-hearted monads, human forms drained of all human qualities, embody sin stripped of all allure.

The first region of Cocytus is Caina, named of course after the biblical Cain, containing those souls who betrayed their kindred. Dante begins his description of this group with two animal similes. The first compares the ashen-faced traitors to frogs with their snouts out of the water («la rana / col muso fuor de l'acqua» [32]) in summer: the season when peasant women dream of gathering grain after the harvest (32-33), a fleeting image of bucolic warmth and fertility amidst the canto's barren sterility. The souls are next compared to storks in the chattering of their teeth («mettendo i denti in nota di cicogna»: line 36). Dante likely had in mind here Brunetto Latini, himself following Isidore (*Etymologies* XII, 7: 16-17), who had described the

¹⁹ H. WEBB, *The Medieval Heart*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 113-35, relates the frozen condition of the damned of Cocytus to that of the poet of the *petrose*. She sees Cocytus as «the most profound revelation of the petrified condition that all the damned souls share with the poet of the *petrose*» (127).

²⁰ See DURLING and MARTINEZ, *Inferno* cit., p. 508.

²¹ See WEBB, *Medieval Heart* cit., pp. 96-142.

stork in his *Trésor* as lacking a tongue and song, making only a rattling sound with its beak²². The tongueless stork and its clacking beak (one thinks back to the adjective «chioccio») brings us back to the descent of language and song in this canto towards unadorned, sublinguistic noise.

As is customary in the *Commedia*, Dante's attention then shifts from the collective to the individual, as he notes two sinners, later identified as Napoleone and Alessandro degli Alberti, so tightly pushed together («sì stretti») that they appear to share a single head of hair (a pose reprised, and intensified, at the end of the canto in the pairing of Ugolino and Ruggieri)²³. Dante brilliantly conveys their vice-like closeness: «Con legno legno spranga mai non cinse / forte così» (49-50). The juxtaposition of *legno* and *legno* conveys at once the tightly clamped boards of the simile and the ironic clamping together of these two antagonists, a posture seen by John Ahern as «a travesty of a lovers' embrace»²⁴. They butt each other out of rage like rams («come due becchi») as traitors are again reduced to animals in their violent brutality.

Details of these and other sinners against kindred are provided by Camicione dei Pazzi, believed to have killed his cousin in order to arrogate his castles. Camicione, whose ears are lost to the cold, asks Dante why he stares at the traitors without inquiring as to their identities: «Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?» (54). The unusual verb *specchiarsi*, describing Dante's gazing, intimates a mirroring of Dante and the traitors. It will emerge as suggestive in light of the radical transformation in the pilgrim's behaviour that occurs later in this canto, where he displays a frosty aggression seen by some critics as specular of the debased conduct of the traitors themselves. Before disclosing his own identity, Camicione identifies Napoleone and Alessandro.

²² «Cygoine est .i. oisiau sans langue; et por ce dient les genz que ele ne chante pas, mais bat son bec et fait grand tumulte» (i, clx, 1): B. LATINI, *Trésor*, ed. and trans. into Italian by P. Beltrami, P. Squillacioti and S. Vatteroni, Turin, Einaudi, 2007. Brunetto's stork is also noted by J. AHERN, *Canto XXXII: Amphion and the Poetics of Retaliation*, in *Lectura Dantis: Inferno*, ed. by A. Mandelbaum, A. Oldcorn and C. Ross, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 413-23 (p. 417); G. VARANINI, *Lectura dantis scagliera: Il canto XXXII dell'«Inferno»*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1962, p. 20.

²³ CHIAVACCI LEONARDI (*Il canto disumano* cit., p. 29) notes the parallel with the brothers Eteocles and Polinices as described by Statius in his *Thebaid*.

²⁴ AHERN, *Canto XXXII* cit., p. 417. See also KIRKPATRICK, *Dante's «Inferno»* cit.: «the distinctions between body and body are violently extinguished; the sinners are not allowed to possess in privacy their own tears, which now solder them together: weeping itself becomes a cruel and unusual punishment» (p. 409).

These counts of Mangona, Tuscany, killed one another in the 1280s, reputedly in the very same instant, in a dispute over their family inheritance. They serve as an emblem of familial treachery, for nobody found in Caina, Camicione declares, is more fittingly punished than they («non troverai ombra / più degna d'esser fitta in gelatina»: 59-60). Camicione describes in lines 61-66 some other iconic traitors against family. With the exception of Mordred (61-62), a treacherous relation of King Arthur, these are all taken from contemporary Italy. Foccaccia (63), is the nickname of Vanni dei Cancellieri of Pistoia, a White Guelph reputed to have killed several of his relatives. Sassol Mascheroni (65-66), was another Florentine who, like Alessandro and Napoleone earlier, murdered one of his kin over a hereditary dispute. The last traitor named by Camicione, having finally identified himself in verses 67-68, is Carlino («e aspetto Carlin che mi scagioni»: 69): a relative of the speaker's who in 1302 (Camicione is using the damned souls' powers of prophecy) would commit the graver sin of treachery against his party.

*

Carlino in effect serves as a bridge to the second region of Cocytus, Antenora (named after the Trojan Antenor), described over the rest of this canto and part of the next. Dante again begins his description of this area with a generalized account of the «mille visi» (70) that protrude from the ice. They appear «cagnazzi» with the cold: an unusual adjective typically understood to describe the purple colour of these visages, but that may also mean “dog-like”. Either would seem appropriate: the former would describe the darkening hue of the souls deeper into Cocytus, following the «divide [...] ombre» (34-35) of Caina, while the latter would recall «la rana / col muso fuor de l'acqua» evoked at the equivalent juncture in Caina, while supplementing the abundant canine imagery in this final circle of Hell.²⁵ The memory of this sight, Dante the narrator says in an “authenticating” aside, causes him to shudder even today when he beholds a

²⁵ On the proliferation of canine images in Cocytus see G. BRUGNOLI, “*Le cagne conte*”, in ID., *Filologia e critica dantesca: studi offerti a Aldo Vallone*, Florence, Olschki, 1989, pp. 95-112 (pp. 102-6).

frozen stream in the world above («onde mi vien riprezzo, / e verrà sempre, de' gelati guazzi» (71-72), emphasizing the supposed continuity between the pilgrim's peregrinations through the afterlife and the author's through the Italian peninsula.

The narrative pivots upon the collision between Dante's foot and the face of one of the traitors below, whom we soon learn to be Bocca degli Abati. In light of Bocca's pained response to Dante's kick («Perché mi peste?»: *Inf.* XXXII, 79), this moment strongly recalls the pilgrim's complex encounter with Pier della Vigna («Perché mi schiante?»: *Inf.* XIII, 33) in the forest of the suicides. The interaction of Dante and Bocca is immediately shrouded in a different sort of ambiguity, however, as the narrator muses in line 76 upon whether the wayfarer's kick was the product of «voler» (whether God's or Dante's own), «destino», or «fortuna». The remainder of the canto, however, in which Dante displays considerable aggression towards Bocca (an aggression described by one critic as a «frightening sadism»)²⁶, strongly suggests that «voler» rather than «fortuna» is at stake, as does the fact that Dante insists that he did not merely kick the soul, but kicked him «forte» (78)²⁷.

Bocca was a Florentine Ghibelline who had remained in Florence after the expulsion of his party in 1258, pretending to sympathize with the ruling Guelphs. His name was inseparable in the city's folklore from the rout of the Florentine Guelphs at the hands of the Sienese Ghibellines in the 1260 Battle of Montaperti – a rout that led to the Ghibelline rule of the city over the next seven years. The role of the pseudo-Guelph Bocca in the demise of the Florentines was reputedly a decisive one, for he was believed to have cut off the hand of the Florentine standard-bearer in the heat of the battle, sending the Guelphs into disarray and allowing the Ghibellines to gain the initiative.

²⁶ AHERN, *Canto XXXII* cit., p. 419.

²⁷ See CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano* cit., p. 38: «La forte percossa è segno evidente di atto volontario».

Dante and Bocca's acrid exchange is the dramatic core of the canto and one of the most startling episodes of the *Inferno*, as Bocca stubbornly resists Dante's increasingly violent demands that he reveal his identity. Like other souls in Cocytus and in contrast with many higher up in Hell, Bocca does not long for fame, but rather anonymity, such is his shame. His resistance ultimately prompts Dante to seize him by the hair on the nape of his neck in an act of crude violence («Allor lo presi per la cuticagna»: 97), threatening to tear every last hair from his head. Only with the intervention of another soul in line 106 is Bocca's name finally voiced («Che hai tu, Bocca?», he calls, «non ti basta sonar con le mascelle, / se tu non latrì?»: 106-8). We find two references to Bocca's canine howling (*latrare*) as well as to the chattering of teeth («sonar con le mascelle»), compared earlier in the canto to the noise of a stork, as Dante once again blurs the distinction in Cocytus between language and sublinguistic cacophony. The name Bocca itself feels like a sublinguistic detail, particularly in light of the feral «bocca» with which the following canto begins («La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto»: *Inf.* XXXIII, 1). Linguistic features of the dialogue («Qual se' tu» [87]; «Or tu chi se'» [88]), meanwhile, evoke the comic-realistic *tenzone* genre practised by Dante in his youth (another past literary experience reformulated in the present canto), while also recalling the pilgrim's exchange with the similarly reviled Florentine Filippo Argenti in canto VIII²⁸.

How we ought to respond to Dante's treatment of Bocca in this canto, so profoundly out of kilter with his conduct elsewhere in this *cantica*, has divided critics. We are not aided in our response by the fact that Virgil, who often serves as a barometer of the aptness or otherwise of Dante's actions, remains silent throughout the canto. Indeed, Virgil is not merely silent but actively marginalized by the pilgrim: Dante commands his guide to wait and stand aside so that he may learn more about this sinner («Maestro mio, or qui m'aspetta»: 82). Dante-pilgrim is

²⁸ See BOSCO and REGGIO, *Divina Commedia* cit., p. 469; DE CAPRIO, *Perché cotanto* cit., p. 1005.

ordinarily a passive and reactive figure, responding to Virgil's commands and to sinners' questions, but seldom—if ever—taking command of a situation as he does here²⁹.

The most normative line of interpretation of this episode is to present Dante as acting here in full accordance with divine justice³⁰. The vindictive treatment of Bocca is seen as an indication, following his more conflicted and sympathetic responses to sinners earlier in the *cantica*, of the pilgrim's development and mastery of the lessons of Hell. As Virgil puts it in canto XX, «qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta» (28): piety in Hell comes with the firm rejection of pity. We in fact find a similar dictum with regard to Dante's similarly crude treatment of the traitor Alberigo in the next canto: «e cortesia fu lui esser villano» (150).

Yet it would seem reductive to regard Dante's violence here simply as an index of a linear and essentially depersonalized moral transformation on the part of the pilgrim. It is, after all, one thing to show disdainful indifference towards those in Hell, as does the Heavenly Messenger who allows Dante and Virgil to enter into the gates of Dis («Ahi quanto mi pareo pien di disdegno!»: *Inf.* IX, 88), but quite another to display such active hostility. As Ahern puts it, «Ripping out Bocca's hair cannot be justified as the high-minded execution of divine justice, as many commentators would have it, unless we posit a vengeful God siding with the Florentine Guelphs»³¹. One way of accounting for the pilgrim's violence is to see him as in some sense

²⁹ See PASQUINI, «*Inferno*» XXXII cit., p. 29 («il ruolo del protagonista vi è assunto, inconsuetamente, dallo stesso personaggio-poeta»); L. BALDASSARO, *Dante's Hardened Heart: The Cocytus Cantos*, in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana*, ed. by P. Cherchi and A. Mastrobuono, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1990, pp. 3-20 («Far from remaining a passive observer of what he witnesses, he assumes an active role, more so than in any other segment of the *Inferno*: p. 4); D. CONSOLI, *Il canto XXXII dell'«Inferno»*, in *Inferno: Letture degli anni 1973-76*, ed. by S. Zennaro, Rome, Bonacci, 1977, pp. 759-84 (the pilgrim displays «una decisione e una fermezza del tutto inconsuete al personaggio tante volte incerto e spaurito»: p. 780).

³⁰ See C. SALVADORI LONERGAN, *The Context of «Inferno» XXXII: Bocca, Ugolino, Fra Alberigo*, in *Dante Commentaries: Eight Studies of the «Divine Comedy»*, ed. by D. Nolan, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1977, pp. 63-84: «Dante here intensifies the punishment inflicted by God on Bocca degli Abati: he is acting as minister, as upholder of the divine justice that is violated by men» (p. 66).

³¹ AHERN, *Canto XXXII* cit., p. 421. Justin Steinberg similarly contends that the pilgrim «is temporarily participating in the vindictiveness of the damned, and hence blurring the line between state-supported and criminal violence»: J. STEINBERG, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 81. CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano* cit., stresses the link between the pilgrim's violence here and the poet's violent language: just as the poet seeks «le rime più introvabili e orribili all'orecchio come le uniche adatte a questo luogo, cerca

“contaminated” by the subhuman moral wasteland in which he finds himself, demonstrating his own susceptibility to the sin he now sees punished in others and displaying a similarly depraved level of conduct³². The notion that he absorbs or mirrors some of the characteristics of those he encounters may indeed be reinforced by Camicione’s earlier words: «Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?». Justin Steinberg argues that the pilgrim here «risks placing himself on the same level as the rogue squadron of demons who patrol the Malebolge and torture their captured prisoners», a group «motivated by pure sadism rather than regulated discretion»³³.

What would seem to motivate this “sadistic” response is the deeply personal nature of Dante’s response to Bocca and to this particular sin of treachery against one’s political party. What informs Dante’s anger is not that the man before him is a sinner, or even a traitor, but that he is Bocca, who becomes an embodiment of the specific, historically situated forms of political treachery and factionalism that have rendered Florence the «città partita» (*Inf.* VI, 61) and that have given rise to the circumstances that caused Dante’s own exile from his native city. To regard the pilgrim who grasps the hair of Bocca with such fury simply as an Everyman who, having learned the lessons of Hell, now become a minister of divine justice is more morally and allegorically straightforward, but surely dilutes the raw personal drama essential to this episode. One might legitimately raise the question, indeed, of whether we can in reality observe an overarching moral development in the pilgrim. After all, those sinners towards whom he displays

anche – e trova – i gesti più dissonanti dall’umano sentire, ciò che all’uomo appunto ripugna, ciò che l’uomo rifiuta, come gli unici gesti e rapporti che siano qui possibili» (p. 41).

³² For BALDASSARO (*Dante’s Hardened Heart*, cit.), Dante’s conduct here «betray[s] his own susceptibility to the very sin whose agents he treats so harshly» (p. 9). The pilgrim’s treatment of Bocca shows his recognition of his own fallen capacity for grave sin – a recognition required for the condition of humility to be fully achieved. Thus, Camicione’s remark «Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?» «sums up the pilgrim’s behavior during his journey through Cocytus. He mirrors the sinners [...] precisely in order to acknowledge his potential to be like them» (p. 17). For KIRKPATRICK, Cocytus attests to Dante-pilgrim’s newly acquired mastery of sin, but at the same time his encounter with Bocca «invite[s] us to ask whether the achievement of mastery is worth the price, in human decency, which the protagonist has to pay for it. [...] The acts of justice which the protagonist performs [...] come to seem indistinguishable from acts of demonic violence» (*Dante’s Inferno* cit., p. 407). Indeed, the idea that this is a «demonic» violence is encouraged by the text, as Bocca’s neighbour Buoso calls out «Qual diavol ti tocca» (v. 108); see FRANKE, *Death and Damnation* cit., p. 30.

³³ STEINBERG, *Dante and the Limits* cit., p. 81.

forceful contempt (Filippo Argenti, Pope Nicholas III, and now Bocca) are all particular *bêtes noires* of Dante's, or else embody a sin, such as papal interference in temporal affairs or political treachery, that has cost him dearly. Disengaged from an entrenched hermeneutical tendency, such encounters appear less to be indexes of the sort of linear moral transformation often imposed upon the text than intermittent flashes of ad hominem resentment: for every Bocca there is a Brunetto, for every Filippo a Francesca. Of course, the poem requires that the pilgrim who arrives in Purgatory has digested the lessons of Hell, but I would argue that the acquisition of this understanding may be traced at a textual level less explicitly than is typically implied³⁴.

The encounter with Bocca is also of interest owing to its intertextual dimension, for Dante returns to his canzone *Così nel mio parlar* in depicting the pilgrim's violent manhandling of Bocca. The closing stanzas of that poem describe a dark and violent sexual fantasy of retribution, as the poet-lover clasps the hair of the unresponsive stony lady and forces her to return his gaze. The grasping of the lady's locks is evidently restaged here in the pilgrim's clenching of Bocca's «capelli» (103), while the interplay between the two episodes is reinforced by some more precise textual echoes and their common references to barking or howling (*latrare*)³⁵. Dante's intention in reprising this fantasy is once more ambiguous. The *petrose*, for all their linguistic and technical gains, are no doubt regarded from the perspective of the *Commedia* as testament to a wrong turn in their author's spiritual development³⁶. Thus, the rewriting of this sexual fantasy might seem to highlight the distance the poet-pilgrim has travelled over the course of the *Inferno*, as the sexual

³⁴ For a challenging of the traditional linear reading of the pilgrim's moral development in the *Commedia*, see L. PERTILE, "Trasmutabile per tutte guise": Dante in the «Comedy», in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by S. Fortuna, M. Gragnolati and J. Trabant, Oxford, Legenda, 2010, pp. 164-78.

³⁵ The lines «Oimè, ché non latra / per me, com'io per lei, nel caldo borro?» from *Così nel mio parlar* are redeployed in the references to howling (*latrare*) in lines 105 and 108: «latrando lui con li occhi in giù raccolti»; «non ti basta sonar con le mascelle, se tu non latrì?».

³⁶ See, for example, J. FRECCERO, *Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit*, in ID., *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 119-35; S. STURM-MADDOX, *The «Rime Petrose» and the Purgatorial Palinode*, in «Studies in Philology», 84 (1987), no. 2, pp. 119-33; WEBB, *Medieval Heart* cit., pp. 113-35.

violence of *Così nel mio parlar* is reformulated as a violence in accordance with God's will³⁷. But it would be simplistic to regard this as a straightforward rejection or "damnation" of that lyric sequence. Rather, the poetry of the *petrose*, no longer restricted to an expression of the poet-lover's internal erotic and spiritual impasse, is granted a new function and validity in this infernal context³⁸. The violence, sterility, and materiality that defined the "stony rhymes", traits that rendered them a wholly inappropriate form of writing for a living Christian, are precisely what render them a valuable resource for the author of this canto.

*

Once identified, Bocca tells Dante of some of the other souls punished here in Antenora. First to be named is Buoso da Duera: a Ghibelline leader of Cremona who betrayed the imperial cause in allowing Charles of Anjou and his French troops to proceed through Lombardy undisturbed. Medieval commentators claim that he was bribed by the French, perhaps even by Charles's wife, hence the fact Buoso «piange qui l'argento de' Franceschi» (115). Tesauro de' Beccheria of Pavia (119) was an abbot beheaded by the Florentine Guelphs after the expulsion of Ghibellines in 1258 for supposedly conspiring with the exiles. Gianni de' Soldanier (121) was a Florentine Ghibelline who betrayed his own party during the popular uprising against them in Florence in 1266. The treachery of Ganelon (122), legendary in the Middle Ages, led to the destruction of the rear guard of Charlemagne's army, while Tebaldello (122) perfidiously opened the gates of his native Faenza to the Bolognese Guelphs, who slaughtered the city's inhabitants³⁹. The

³⁷ See PASQUINI, *«Inferno» XXXII* cit.: «Così come tutt'altro sapore assume la violenza vagheggiata da Dante per punire la crudele resistenza della donna [...] quando la troviamo declinata sul registro del rancore comunale e politico [...] con tanto maggiore legittimità ed efficacia, in quanto il "latrare" di Bocca richiama il feroce accenno alla donna nella canzone» (p. 32); DURLING and MARTINEZ, *Time and the Crystal* cit.: «The poet's reiteration of the language of *Così nel mio parlar* in Cocito implicitly acknowledges his own violence; but it also marks his distance from the personal aggression of *Così*» (pp. 221-22).

³⁸ See J. BARTUSCHAT, *Le «Rime»*, in *Le opere minori di Dante nella prospettiva della «Commedia»*, *Lecture classensi*, 38 (2009), pp. 17-40: «Nella *Commedia* le esperienze liriche precedenti sono superate ma non cancellate, esse son rilette, ricorrette e reintegrate in una nuova visione» (p. 19).

³⁹ This reference to Tebaldello suggests to VARANINI (*Canto XXXII* cit., p. 28) and PASQUINI (*Inferno XXXII* cit., p. 36) that Dante's source and model in these lines may have been the anonymous *Serventese dei Lambertazzi e dei Geremei*,

concentration of Italian sinners in this canto is not coincidental. Treachery, and especially political treachery, is a defining sin of the Italian peninsula in this period, defined as it was by political turbulence, schism, and factionalism. Two more Italians, Ruggieri and Ugolino, await us in the remaining lines of the canto, the «due ghiacciati in una buca» of line 125, completing a very careful and symmetrical distribution of the sinners of canto XXXII, who, as noted by several commentators, form a kind of chiasmus⁴⁰.

We learn nothing of the identities of Ugolino and Ruggieri until canto XXXIII and find no anticipation here of the human drama that will define that canto. On the contrary, these sinners seem rather to culminate the images of bestiality that have defined canto XXXII. Like the Alberti twins, the boundaries between Ugolino and Ruggieri become violated in another parody of a lovers' embrace («sì che l'un capo a l'altro era cappello»: 126), described by Hawkins as «a grotesque rendering of a back-to-front embrace – the spoon position of lovers» as Dante «plays, hideously, with notions of unity»⁴¹. Here, however, we find not only a mingling of tears, but one soul gnawing upon the skull of the other, as the gruesome facts are related without embellishment in a grimly physiological language («così 'l sovrano li denti a l'altro pose / là 've 'l cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca»: 128-29)⁴². Ugolino's eating of Ruggieri's body introduces the theme of the Eucharist that will also resonate in canto XXXIII. This cannibalistic and vengeful act, a literal eating of the material flesh, is antithetical to the life-giving bread and body of the Eucharist⁴³. As well as the reference to bread («e come 'l pan per fame si manduca»: 127), the

which relates a series of contemporary Bolognese and Romagnan affairs. DURLING and MARTINEZ note that the two lists of five contemporary figures recall a technique typical of the medieval *sirventese* (*Inferno* cit., p. 511).

⁴⁰ On this “chiasmus”, see CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano* cit., p. 34; DE CAPRIO, *Perché cotanto* cit., passim; and FACHARD, *Canto XXXII* cit., who identifies «un'assai rigorosa simmetria strutturale e tematica, regolata da una spartizione di versi quantitativamente uguale tra la Caina e l'Antenora» (p. 447).

⁴¹ HAWKINS, *Bottom of the Universe* cit., pp. 151-52.

⁴² See CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, *Il canto disumano* cit.: «La descrizione è distaccata e scientifica [...] e senza alcun commento né aggettivo, quasi sia questo il solo modo di dire ciò che sarebbe quasi indicibile e intollerabile all'umano sentire» (p. 45).

⁴³ See AHERN, *Canto XXXII* cit.: «In Christianity eating Christ's body under the form of bread creates and maintains the collective body of the redeemed that is the Church. Here, by contrast, a secular head quite literally consumes a spiritual head in vengeful ingestion, not loving communion» (p. 420).

verb *manducare* is the very verb used in John's Gospel to describe the Eucharistic meal⁴⁴. This gesture is also described via a simile drawn from Statius's *Thebaid*, describing the dying Tydeus gnawing bestially upon the severed head of Melanippus («non altrimenti Tidëo si rose / le tempie a Menalippo per disdegno, / che quei faceva il teschio e l'altre cose» [130-32]), thus framing this depraved canto with fitting references to Thebes.

Dante asks the cannibal (soon identified as Ugolino) to explain why he shows such loathing towards his neighbour through a gnawing that Dante describes as a «bestial segno». On the one hand, this striking expression simply conveys the idea of a gruesome, bestial deed. But in the use of «segno» it also raises the theme of language and signification with which the canto began and suggests, in Lombardi's words, «the possibility of a subhuman form of communication in hell»⁴⁵. «Bestial segno» is in this sense an oxymoron, as language for Dante is a uniquely human faculty that beasts cannot possess (see *Dve* I, ii, 5). Nevertheless, something *is* paradoxically signified in this cannibalistic gesture. In his *De vulgari* Dante had described the linguistic sign as a «rationale signum et sensuale» [sign based on reason and the senses] (I, iii, 2). But, as discussed by Yowell, we behold here a sign altogether stripped of the rational and intellectual⁴⁶. Rather than the *signi* of Dante's words, themselves restricted in their expressive capacity, as acknowledged in the canto's opening prologue, it is this sub-linguistic *segno* that conveys the quiddity of Cocytus. Ugolino's *segno* will in due course be refashioned into what Barolini terms «the more ornate and seductive *segno* of his oration in canto XXXIII»⁴⁷. But we

⁴⁴ See John 6:57 («qui *manducat* meam carnem et bibit meum sanguinem in me manet et ego in illo»).

⁴⁵ LOMBARDI, *Syntax of Desire* cit., p. 149.

⁴⁶ D. YOWELL, *Ugolino's 'bestial segno': The «De vulgari eloquentia» in «Inferno» 32-33*, in «Dante Studies», 104 (1986), pp. 121-43: «Bestiality marks Ugolino from the moment we encounter him; it distinguishes his countenance, his actions, and his mode of communication or 'bestial segno' which in hell succeeds in conveying meaning not via the *rationale signum et sensuale*, but through the *sensuale* – bestial – sign alone: *segno*, then, because in hell communication has occurred, *bestiale*, because words have not been exchanged» (p. 123).

⁴⁷ BAROLINI, *Undivine Comedy* cit., p. 95. As Elena Lombardi notes, Ugolino's «bestial segno» returns gruesomely following his oration in the next canto: «At the end of this episode, the 'bestial segno' becomes truly literal. It dissolves into what for the *De vulgari eloquentia* is the natural state of animal utterance, i.e., sound, the shrieking of Ugolino's teeth, likened to dog's fangs, on Ruggieri's skull: "il teschio misero co' denti / che furo a l'osso, come

must keep in mind that it is here that we behold the essence of his *odio*: a hate that is animalistic, futile, and not fully reducible to language.

The canto ends with the pilgrim offering to Ugolino a pact, a *convegno*, in order that he might tell Dante his story and the origins of his hate. But unlike previous pacts that Dante has made with sinners⁴⁸, offered on the condition that he would prolong their fame or restore their reputation on earth, this one is made on a very different condition. Dante has learned from his encounter with Bocca that fame here in Cocytus no longer serves as an enticement for the damned. Instead, Ugolino will speak only on the promise of infamy of his enemy, Ruggieri. Hate, the pilgrim well recognizes, is the only motivating force in this place. Dante qualifies this pact in a somewhat ambiguous manner, avowing to return to earth with news of Ruggieri's sin «se quella con ch'io parlo non si secca» (139). "That with which I speak" is unquestionably Dante's tongue, but the verse has been interpreted variously. Most gloss it as "if I do not die", "if I survive this terrible place", or as an idiomatic expression meaning "if I keep my promise"⁴⁹. Others see it as a colloquialism through which Dante swears on his life, or even as a statement of ineffability, an acknowledgement of the poet's potential inability to find an adequate expressive means for what he is about to hear⁵⁰. This would bookend the canto with expressions of linguistic inadequacy⁵¹, following the rich prologue, while connecting the discourse of (negative) ineffability to the figure of the (tongueless) stork earlier in the canto.

d'un can, forti"». E. LOMBARDI, *Plurilinguism «sub specie aeternitatis» and the Strategies of a Minority Autor*, in *Dante's Plurilingualism* cit., pp. 133-47 (p. 139).

⁴⁸ See STEINBERG, *Dante and the Limits* cit., pp. 127-66 for an astute reading of Dante's infernal pacts.

⁴⁹ See PASQUINI, «*Inferno*» XXXII cit., p. 33, who equates it with the idiomatic expression «mi si secchi la lingua» and sees it as an example of the canto's dialectal register, along with such expressions as «fitta in gelatina» (60), «non mi dar più lagna» (95), «lo presi per la cuticagna» (97), «sonar con le mascelle» (107) and «qual diavol ti tocca?» (108).

⁵⁰ VARANINI, *Canto XXXII* cit., pp. 30-31 and A. PÉZARD, *Le chant des traîtres*, in *Lecture dell'«Inferno»*, ed. by V. Vettori, Milan, Marzorati, 1963, pp. 308-42. Pézard suggests the phrase refers to the poet's potential incapacity to find an adequate expressive means. On the various responses to this crux prior to 2000, see FACHARD, *Canto XXXII* cit., p. 455. More recently, BELLOMO has connected it persuasively to Psalm 136, 6: «Adhaereat lingua mea faucibus meis, si non meminero tui» (*Tra giganti e traditori* cit., p. 247).

⁵¹ YOWELL, *Ugolino* cit., notes that «*Inferno* XXXII is framed by the instrumental *lingua*, opening the canto with a rhetorical expression of linguistic inadequacy and closing it with an ironic suggestion of silence» (p. 123).

Perhaps more than any other canto in the *Inferno*, this one is intended to fill its reader with repugnance; that «riprezzo» that continues to afflict its narrator. If the *Paradiso* will be defined by the notion of *trasumanar*, of becoming more than human in reconciling oneself to God, Cocytus, and especially canto XXXII, is defined by an inverse form of transformation, a process of *subumanar*, as the traitors are seen metamorphosed into beasts. Language follows an analogous descent and plays a vital role thematically in this canto. Not only does Dante's lexis become ever harsher, as he declares the impossibility of rendering poetically the horrors of Cocytus, but the voices of the sinners themselves are compared to a canine howling and a stork-like chatter, culminating in Ugolino's «bestial segno»: a non-verbal "sign" whose savage eloquence communicates more vividly and viscerally than any linguistic *signum* the barren and hateful essence of this unutterable place. The ultimate evil, as much as the «sommo bene» (*Par.* XXVI, 134), is resistant to linguistic expression.